

Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*)

NMPIF level: Biodiversity Conservation Concern, Level 1 (BC1)

NMPIF assessment score: 15

NM stewardship responsibility: Low

National PIF status: Watch List

New Mexico BCRs: 16

Primary breeding habitat(s): Montane Riparian, Cave/Cliff (Waterfalls)

Other habitats used: Forages widely in upland areas

Summary of Concern

Black Swift is a widely dispersed migrant species of western North America. It is closely associated with rock cliffs near or behind waterfalls, where it builds nesting colonies. At least three colonies are currently known in New Mexico, although more may exist.

Associated Species

American Dipper

Distribution

Black Swift is a summer migrant that breeds locally across much of western North America, extending as far north as southeast Alaska, as far east as central Colorado, and south through Mexico and Central America to Costa Rica, with additional populations in the West Indies. It winters in South America (Lowther and Collins 2002).

In New Mexico, this species breeds regularly at Jemez Falls in Sandoval County (Parmeter et al. 2002). In 2003, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish contracted Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory to evaluate other potential locations (Levad and Gunn 2004). In addition to Jemez Falls, they confirmed occupancy at another suspected site, Nambe Falls, in Santa Fe County, and discovered a new colony at Rio Quemado Falls in the Pecos Wilderness (Levad and Gunn 2004). Observations of Black Swifts at Canones Creek indicate that the Tierra Amarillo might also harbor one or more colonies (Levad and Gunn 2004, J. Beason, pers. comm.).

Ecology and Habitat Requirements

Black Swifts nest colonially on ledges on steep rock faces, usually near or behind waterfalls. Thus, nesting locations are scattered and most are highly inaccessible. This species forages over most montane and lowland habitats, sometimes far from nesting colonies, preying primarily on nuptial flight swarms of winged reproductive ants and other insects. In Colorado, Black Swifts have been seen over 14,000 ft peaks (Knorr 1961, Lowther and Collins 2002).

A small number of pairs breed at Jemez Falls from late June through September. Nests are built entirely of moss and situated on high rock ledges that are shaded from the sun and concealed from aerial predators. Clutches consist of a single egg, which limits the annual reproductive potential of this species (Lowther and Collins 2002).

Conservation Status

Species Assessment

DISTRIBUTION	4
THREATS	4
GLOBAL POPULATION SIZE	4
LOCAL POPULATION TREND	2
IMPORTANCE OF NEW MEXICO TO BREEDING	1
COMBINED SCORE	15

Black Swift is a Biodiversity Conservation Concern, Level 1 species for New Mexico, with a NMPIF combined score of 15. From NMPIF, it receives a score of 4 for threat to breeding in the state. Black Swift is a national PIF Watch List Species. At the continental level, it receives PIF vulnerability scores of 4 for its small population size and limited non-breeding distribution. Black Swift is a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2002) national Bird of Conservation Concern.

Population Size

PIF estimates a species population of 150,000. Lowther and Collins (2002) estimated a North American population of 10,000-15,000, with centers of abundance in Washington and British Columbia. Boyle (1998) estimated 700-800 pairs in Colorado. Numbers breeding in New Mexico are limited to a small

number of pairs at Jemez Falls, Nambe Falls, Rio Quemado Falls, and possibly elsewhere. The current total number of colonies in New Mexico is probably less than ten (J. Beason, pers. comm.)

Population Trend

This species is poorly sampled by BBS. However, limited survey data indicate a sharp and statistically significant decline from 1980-2004 (annual trend = -6.4, $p = 0.07$, $n = 44$) driven largely by surveys in British Columbia. The small New Mexico population appears to be stable or increasing.

Threats

Black Swifts nest in remote locations and their breeding habitat is not much affected by human activities. People are drawn to waterfalls, however, and disturbance to nesting birds, particularly from rock climbers, is a possibility. This species is vulnerable in New Mexico because of its very small state population, restricted to a small number of breeding locations.

Management Issues and Recommendations

Management for Black Swift in New Mexico should focus on ensuring that the Jemez Falls breeding colony is adequately protected. Recreational use above the waterfall does not seem to impact nesting activity, but streamside access to the falls from below is potentially disruptive and should be managed.

NMPIF Recommendations

- Find ways to appropriately limit public access to Black Swift nesting areas while maintaining recreational values and uses.

Species Conservation Objectives

PIF Objectives

The PIF North American Landbird Conservation Plan places Black Swift in the conservation action category Management. It sets a population objective of increasing the current population by 50% over the next 30 years.

NMPIF Objectives

- Maintain or increase the current population at Jemez Falls.
- Survey for other possible breeding locations in New Mexico.

Sources of Information:

Boyle, S. 1998. Black Swift *Cypseloides niger*. Pp. 236–237 in Colorado breeding bird atlas (H. E. Kingery, ed.). Colorado Bird Atlas Partnership and Colorado Div. Wildl., Denver, CO.

Knorr, O. A. 1961. The geographical and ecological distribution of the Black Swift in Colorado. Wilson Bull. 73:155-170.

Levad, R., and C. Gunn. 2004. Inventory and evaluation of New Mexico waterfalls as potential nesting sites for Black Swifts. Unpublished report submitted to New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, Grand Junction, CO.

Lowther, P. E., and C. T. Collins. 2002. Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*). In The Birds of North America, No. 676 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.

Parmeter, J., B. Neville, and D. Emkalns. 2002. New Mexico Bird Finding Guide. New Mexico Ornithological Society, Albuquerque, NM.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2002. Birds of conservation concern 2002. Division of Migratory Bird Management, Arlington, VA. 99 p.